

ANTHROPOLOGY IN VICTORIA 100 YEARS AGO

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Victoria's aboriginal population in 1835, contemporaries estimated, numbered upwards of 5,000 (Smyth 1878, 1: 31-38). It was a closely knit tribal society in which a balance was maintained between food supply and the nomadic hunters and gatherers. European settlement destroyed this balance and with it the tribal organization. Within 15 years there were probably fewer than 3,000 detribalized aborigines, and by 1861 their number had dwindled to 2,000. By this date, most of the survivors lived in remote and unsettled areas of the colony, while only 370 aborigines were distributed over the plains of W. Victoria and Port Phillip; between the years 1838 and 1858 membership of the Yarra tribe fell from 300 to 32.

In 1858 the Victorian Government appointed a Select Committee of the Legislative Council 'to enquire into the present condition of the aborigines . . . and the best means of alleviating their absolute wants'. The committee, moved by sincere humanitarianism and a recognition of the moral obligations of colonists towards the dispossessed aborigines, questioned responsible witnesses verbally and by questionnaire. Its report, together with the evidence of witnesses and the written replies to 89 questions concerning aboriginal society and its future prospects, was published in the *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council for 1858/59*. The committee expressed the hope that their findings would 'form one of the most valuable historical documents extant connected with Victoria, and be prized by the learned societies of Europe . . .' (*Report: V*). It certainly appeared at a germinal period in the development of anthropological thought, yet their report made no impact on academics overseas and, in Victoria, despite the implementation of their recommendations, the decimation of the aboriginal population continued. When, in 1877, a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate aboriginal welfare, only 774 aborigines of pure descent survived throughout the colony.

A century ago, there were basic limitations in the assumptions of European observers of all primitive societies and in their methods of studying them. In their obvious failure to gain insight into aboriginal psychology and social cohesion, the Victorian committee and its witnesses were typical of the well-meaning but ineffectual approach which characterized the pre-Darwinian era of anthropology. It is, e.g., more surprising to note that one witness advised the committee to question an aboriginal who 'possessed a great deal of valuable information', than that his comment was ignored (*Evidence: 12*).

Perhaps the greatest influence in the intellectual climate of the time, was the acceptance of *Genesis* as the basic document of prehistory. Primitive man, and all ancient civilizations, had to be assessed within a time-scale which began in 4004 B.C. The newly deciphered scripts of Egypt and Mesopotamia had confirmed Classical Greek traditions of the remote antiquity of the great oriental empires, and consequently, it was difficult to envisage any time-interval between Creation and Civilization in which to place the stone-using societies. Whereas post-Darwinians

looked upon such peoples as archaic remnants of man's first strivings towards technological and cultural progress, in 1859 they were usually judged as degenerations from the supposed earlier civilized condition of mankind. In an individualistic age of self-help, slothful races, who had forsaken accepted living standards and had deliberately sought the exterior darkness of the far corners of the world, excited little sympathy.

As upholders of Christianity during a period of rather formalized and self-righteous moral conduct, mid-century Europeans judged primitive society by their own code of behaviour. It is not surprising that, when the aborigines were assessed by these criteria, they were found wanting. When the Victorian Select Committee asked—'are the [aborigines] addicted to religious observances?', 10 replies were emphatically in the negative, while another witness considered that a few 'remnants' remained (*Evidence*: 69-70). Some years earlier, a missionary had remarked of the Tasmanians, that 'all moral views and impressions . . . every idea bearing on our origin and destination as rational beings seems to have been erased from their breasts' (Dove 1842: 249). His opinion was echoed, amongst others, by an Assistant-Protector of Victorian Aborigines, who concluded that 'in the licentiousness of their lives they are as men of Sodom, sinners exceedingly' (Dredge 1845: 12).

These judgements, which condemned the aborigines as the justly punished dregs of heathen antiquity, left tribal society without function or purpose, because they denied the existence of its non-material bonds. The implications of this attitude are everywhere apparent in contemporary sources, and the 1858 Select Committee was no exception. When a witness, W. Hull, was asked his explanation of the mortality amongst the aborigines, he answered:

I believe that it is the design of Providence that the inferior races should pass away before the superior races, and that independently of all other causes, since we have occupied the country, the aborigines must cease to occupy it. (*Evidence*: 9)

It is significant that Hull was author of a book, in which he traced the descent of the aborigines from ancient oriental civilization (Hull 1846). A comment in similar vein was made in 1853, in correspondence between a squatter and the Bishop of Melbourne (Bride 1898: 275). Providence was invoked, with some emphasis, by the contributor of an article on the aborigines in an English geographical dictionary:

We are bold to say, that the least and worst of the settlements founded in this vast continent, has a thousand times more of all that dignifies, exalts, and adorns humanity, than ever was possessed by its entire aboriginal population. To complain of the disappearance of the latter, is . . . hardly more reasonable than it would be to complain of the drainage of marshes or of the disappearance of wild animals. (McCulloch 1854, 1: 230)

In this mid-century atmosphere of prejudice and dogmatism it is not surprising that the pseudo-science of phrenology flourished. The advice of a Melbourne practitioner, sought by the 1858 Select Committee, was not encouraging. The combination of aboriginal temperaments, he concluded—

renders them rather deceitful, suspicious, time-servers, or dissemblers. They are comparatively quiet and inoffensive as long as their own traditions . . . are not attacked; then they are cruel, as moral and intellectual weakness ever will be. The sides of the forehead offer the greatest possible contrast with the Grecian or artistic skill. Arts, manufactures, constructive emulation, hopeful and striving . . . hardly exist in their mind. . . . (*Evidence*: 46-8)

As exiles from Europe in the era of the National State, colonists optimistically envisaged the emergence of colonial nations; the National Museum and the Royal

Society of Victoria were building within the year of the Select Committee on aborigines. Europeans found it hard to comprehend the confined area of Victorian tribal territories and the sparseness of their population; the complexity of their social organization was seldom realized. The result was that observers continually sought larger political units or 'nations', and usually elevated some tribal elder to the dignity of the monarchy. But there was no respect, and much amused contempt, embodied in a title such as 'King Billy'.

It is not surprising that the Select Committee at first advocated a compulsory resettlement of all Victorian aborigines in the one district. A similar policy had already completed the extermination of the Tasmanian aborigines, by transferring them to Flinders I. in 1835. Even George Grey, a sympathetic student of the aborigines, considered that enforced detribalization was the only profitable native welfare policy (Grey 1841, 11: 217 ff). The Select Committee 'reluctantly abandoned' this convenient administrative plan in the face of opposition from William Thomas, Guardian of Aborigines, who assured members that 'the blacks would not leave their own hunting grounds, and would pine away at once if removed from them' (*Report*: V). Subsequently, however, the aborigines were encouraged to settle on government or mission stations, whose location took little account of tribal loyalties. There are few authentic records of the reactions of Victorian aborigines to their detribalization and, because of the insight it provides into the close relationship between the aboriginal and his land, the following letter is quoted extensively; it is testimony to the correctness of Thomas's assessment. On 7 January 1877, Jackey White, an aborigine on the Lake Condah Mission Station, in the Western District, wrote to Samuel P. Winter of "Murndal", near Hamilton:

'I want to come back to Wannon', he stated, and he continued, 'I knew you ever since I was a boy you used to keep us live I recollect about thirteen or fourteen years ago when you used to travel about five or six miles to bring us to your place, so will you be obliged to write to the government to get us off this place, so if you will write to the government for us, and get us off here, I will do work for you and will never leave you so I wish you get us off this place, I always wish to be in my country, and to be in my country where I was born, I am in a mission Station and I dont like to be here, they always grumble and all my friends are all dead, and now we are old, and I am now miserable, all the Wannon blackfellows are all dead and I am left, my poor uncle Yellert Perne is dead he was quiet young where he came hire when I see his grave I always feel sorry, I can't get away without leaf from the government. This country don't suit me I'm a stranger in this country I like to be in my country . . .' (Quoted by courtesy of W. L. Winter-Cooke Esq. of 'Murndal'.)

By 1859, Thomas had had 21 years' experience of living and working with the aborigines, and he understood them better than any man in the colony. He would have understood the significance of the pathetic outburst by the aborigine, Derimut, reported by W. Hull to the Select Committee (*Evidence*: 12). Derimut accosted Hull outside the Bank of Victoria and begged him for money.

'You see, Mr. Hull', he said, 'Bank of Victoria, all this mine, all along here Derimut's once, no matter now, me soon tumble down.' I said, 'Have you no children?' and he flew into a passion immediately. 'Why me have lubra? Why me have picanniny? You have all this place, no good have children, no good have lubra, me tumble down and die very soon now.'

Because of his limited linguistic knowledge and complete lack of anthropological training, even Thomas shared some of the assumptions of his contemporaries. For example, at the 1858 Select Committee enquiry he betrayed lack of comprehension of aboriginal religious life. In his own manuscript writings, which are preserved in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, his comments frequently indicate his ignorance

of the motivation for aboriginal behaviour and typify the barrier between the European and the aboriginal cultural inheritance. A note of exasperation was recorded by Thomas in his diary on 10 August 1846. On that day his influential aboriginal friend, Billibellary, died. The men of all Port Phillip and Western Port tribes had assembled previously around his death-bed. They had come, Thomas noted:

to determine the cause of Billibellary's approaching dissolution, the result of their deliberations was that about eighteen months back the Goulburn Blacks had found out where Billibellary deposited some hair he had cut off, they had dug it up and mixing it with kidney fat had greased their weapons and then put the remainder in the fire. Notwithstanding some very sensible blacks were present, yet these strange infatuated notions were in despite of all reasoning . . . and the dying man felt some alleviation of his short breathings in the awful threats of those who surrounded him to avenge his death, the destruction of many Goulburns.

A century later, misunderstanding and ignorance of the aboriginal mind is still widespread. However, adequate training in social anthropological methods has enabled some anthropologists, particularly Stanner (1958), to comprehend the spiritual values of aboriginal life. But social anthropology stemmed from the post-Darwinian analysis of man's place in nature. In the year of *Origin of Species*, the European ideological legacy conditioned the attitudes of even the most sympathetic observers and inhibited an understanding of aboriginal society and the formulation of suitable welfare policies. It has been shown elsewhere (Mulvaney 1958), that this resulted in a concentration upon the superficial record of material factors; the dying race took with it to the grave the secrets which had preserved its social cohesion in the centuries before European dominance.

It must be emphasized that, in 1859, Victoria had been founded a mere quarter of a century. In this frontier society, it is somewhat unreal to concentrate upon the influence of intellectual factors. The ex-convict shepherd, or immigrant urban labourer, shared the prejudices of administrators, missionaries and phrenologists, but did not justify them by any appeal to abstract principles. The callous indifference of the uneducated colonists towards the aborigines is familiar to any student of contemporary sources. Typical of many pastoral pioneers was the shepherd in the Wimmera during the early 1840's, as described by a squatter (Bride 1898: 217):

He held a carbine in the place of a crook, and an old regulation pistol was stuck in his belt, instead of the more classic pastoral pipe. . . . After some conversation he led me to a waterhole, where the skeleton of a native . . . lay in the mud. There was a bullet-hole through the back of the skull. 'He was shot in the water,' the man told me, 'as he was a-trying to hide hisself after a scrimmage! There was a lot more t'other side.'

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